HOME
Genesis 11:1-9
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In 1980 the Joint Center for Urban Studies of MIT and Harvard issued a fascinating report entitled, "The Nation's Families: 1960-1990." Among the report's prediction for the institution of the American home by 1990:

> "..Husband and wife households with only one working spouse will account for only 14% of all households, as compared with 43% in 1960.
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> "...Wives will contribute about 40% of family income in 1990, compared to 25% at present.
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> "...At least 13 separate types of households will eclipse the conventional family, including such categories as: female head, widowed with children; and male head, previously married, with children.
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> "...More than a third of the couples first married in the 1970's will have divorced. More than a third of the children born in the 1970's will have spent part of their childhood with a single parent."

By themselves, those trends do not appear to be dramatic. Together they mark revolutionary change occurring in what we still assume is the bedrock foundation of our common life. One reporter observes that most of us began life in a classic nuclear family: father was the wage earner; mother was the homemaker who did most of the parenting. "But today," he observes, "there is no such thing as a typical family....Instead, the diversity in American households of the 1980's has become a Rubik's cube of complexity. And like Rubik's cube, the chances of getting it back to its original state are practically nil." (John Naisbett, Megatrends, p. 232-234)

The Bexley High School paper, The Torch, a little less sophisticated than the Harvard report, but also a little closer to us, last week did a feature on home and family and incorporated a marvelous cartoon which was worth more than the proverbial thousand words. In one sketch, a 1953 family is approaching the dinner table: young child is in place, mother is already seated, father comes to the table, white shirt and tie, newspaper in his hand, pipe still in his mouth. In the background looms the familiar shape of a Norge refrigerator. In 1983 the Norge has become a double-door Frigidaire with automatic ice and water. No people are present at this modern dinner table. In fact, there are cobwebs where mother and father used to sit. On the table reposes no meatloaf, but a single TV dinner. The chalkboard on the Frigidaire bears this message: "Mom: Dad, won't be home tonight. I'll be at baseball practice. Jeff"

The scenario is a true one. It is no comic exaggeration: yet we worry a lot about it. We are inclined, most of the time, to wring our hands about it and lament the demise of the home and traditional family values. We are inclined sometimes to think that everything would be all right with our whole culture if we could simply recapture some of whatever we have lost in these past several decades. And the changes in the home seem to gather up all of that anxiety, fear, concern.

What the young people who are responsible for their school newspaper saw that we often miss is that the whole culture has changed and is changing, not simply the family and the home. We are, in fact, in transition, on a journey of sorts, which makes it important for thoughtful people, people who care about the home, about family, about the larger culture, to keep their wits about them and not be lured into oversimplification.

Whenever I set out to work through some basic Christian idea, I am guided by three principles:

The first is my understanding that religion is really the search for and the practice of basic truth. Religion is not a set of pious platitudes, not a scheme to sugar-coat reality and make the harshness of life easier to swallow. Real religion is our deepest approach to the truth which is basic to life, the truth which supports life itself. That truth is God.

The second basic principle is this: God has given us minds to use as fully as we are capable. We certainly will never know all the truth, for we are human and limited, but it is our responsibility to work constantly to understand truth more completely. God intends us to.

The third basic principle of my search for religious truth is this: Truth, if it really is truth, cannot be diminished by honest questioning and probing. It only shines through more brightly as the debris of misunderstanding is swept away. Therefore, no aspect of faith should be withheld from our critical investigation on the excuse that "it is too sacred". The only justifiable reason for calling something sacred is that it is so very true. So, what is really sacred will only benefit from honest questioning.

Concerning the resurrection of Jesus Christ, then, I read the accounts with those three principles in mind. The story is told in the four gospels and the writings of Paul. Those are the original sources.

We would expect such an important event to be accurately described by those who considered it the most significant experience in all history. But even a quick reading reveals obvious inconsistencies in the biblical accounts. Take just two obvious test questions.

First, to whom did the Risen Lord appear? Paul does not even mention his appearance to the women leaving the tomb as Matthew describes it. Only Paul says there was a separate appearance to James and only he and Luke mention Jesus' appearing first to Peter. There is, in addition, about equal division over whether the resurrection appearances took place in Galilee or in Jerusalem.

A second test question: What about the ascension of Jesus, his rising into heaven? Paul and Mark say nothing about it at all and only Luke clearly describes such an occurrence. Paul's encounter with Jesus on the Damascus Road happened at least two years and perhaps nine years after the crucifixion, which hardly fits into the traditional idea of forty days from Easter to ascension.

There are other questions we might ask about obvious inconsistencies, but let these examples serve our purpose today.

The New Testament places Jesus, clearly, in a home. The Gospel writers are not much interested in Jesus between birth and the age of thirty. With one exception, these are silent years about which we can only speculate. At the age of 12, Luke reports, his parents took him to Jerusalem for Passover. It is a week's journey. It would have been a great adventure. The road was full of new friends. When his parents realized that he was not in the caravan on the way home they returned and found him in the Temple listening to the scholars discuss and argue. That is all we know. Later attempts were made to fill the gap. Apocryphal gospels were written telling wonderful stories of the boy Jesus' supernatural powers. None of them made it into the canon of the New Testament. What we know is that he lived in a family, in a home, and was influenced by mother, father, brothers, sisters, cousins, aunts, uncles, and by the larger community of Nazareth.

The prototype home, however, is one back on the edge of recorded history. The true first family of the faith is Abraham and Sarah. And the first, and in many ways most important thing we know about them, is God's call to them to move from where they were to a new place, and their willingness to do that. Critical scholarship points out that what we have in these primal stories is a nomadic, desert people, becoming a settled, more agrarian culture. Unlike many other Bedouin clans and tribes, the Hebrews settled down and their sense of home has been central to them ever since. But here, the relationship between God and his people is cast in terms of movement, pilgrimage if you will; obedience to the call of God to find a new home - and trust that God's promises will be honored and his blessing sure.

No one who has moved from one community to another; no one who has said goodby to children moving out and away; no one who has struck out on an uncharted, new adventure misses the primal power of that motif. One of the commentators on this text has their friends saying to Abraham and Sarah: "Don't leave home! Enjoy! You've worked hard and done well. You're home safe. Don't throw it all away for a wild dream. You don't know what you're getting into. Things will never be the same." (Robert Raines, Going Home, p. 27)

Every time I reflect on the incredible story of the settling of this continent, and the Western migration to the frontier I am struck by it. To stand in the middle of the small stone foundations at Jamestown, or better yet on the decks of these three tiny ships, the Susan Constant, Godspeed, and Discovery, is, for me at least, always to think about what it meant to those people who left everything, but particularly home, to come to this new land. What must it have been like to say goodbye to parents, for instance, with only the remotest possibility of seeing them again? I always end up concluding that those good people were not more callous, nor less feeling than I: that perhaps they even knew a bit more about home and family; that they had some resources we have yet to recover. They had, I conclude, something of Abraham and Sarah's strength and faith.

It is a theme plumbed deeply in literature. When the stranger from outer space looked longingly at the sky and said, "E.T. phone home," Steven Spielberg was putting himself in very good company. Thomas Wolfe wrote some of the most powerful words in all of literature in the preface to Look Homeward Angel.

> "Naked and alone we came into exile. In her dark womb we did not know our mother's face; from the prison of her flesh have we come into the unspeakable and uncommunicable prison of this earth...Which of us has know his brother? Which of us has looked into his father's heart? Which of us has not remained forever prison pent? Which of us is not forever a stranger and alone..."

> and they will kill him; and when he is killed, after three days he will rise." But they did not understand the saying, and they were afraid to ask him. (Mark 8:31-33; 9:30-32)

In both these brief passages from Mark, our earliest gospel, Jesus had been teaching the Twelve about his death and rising again after three days. How did the disciples react? They were embarrassingly dense. In the first passage, Peter took Jesus aside and began to scold him for talking in such a manner. Peter thought the whole thing wass outlandish, way-out crazy talk. In the second passage, the disciples' reaction was complete bewilderment. It reads: "They did not understand the saying, and they were afraid to ask him." They thought Jesus had gone off the deep end.

In fact, our evidence is unanimous in saying in a wide variety of ways that the disciples had no expectation of the Resurrection whatsoever. There was nothing in their background to prepare them for such a thing. Take the Bible of their day. In the entire Old Testament there is no accepted idea of resurrection except as a part of a general resurrection at the last day, at Judgment Day. Any idea of resurrection during the course of history instead of simply at the end of history, any idea of an individual resurrection, was a completely foreign and unacceptable concept.

The fact is the disciples were far from being pre-conditioned to expect such a thing. They were highly skeptical and then quite dumbfounded. And yet in the end they were firmly convinced that Christ was resurrected. What caused their about-face? According to all our accounts, it was the appearances of Jesus which were decisive for the disciples' faith. Except for Mark, whose ending has been lost, all the accounts tell of Christ's appearing to the disciples after his death. Eleven different appearances are reported. There are discrepancies between the accounts as might be expected in such an emotionally charged situation, especially when the earliest writers were reconstructing an event of twenty or more years before.

However, the accounts are unanimous at least in this much: The appearances came to those already trying to believe in the Christ. They were not public miracles. The appearances were faith assurances, not proof to compel faith.

About the different locations of the appearances - some accounts say in Jerusalem and some say in Galilee. Perhaps it is as simple as this: Jesus appeared to his followers wherever they happened to be. We know they were first in Jerusalem, then traveled to Galilee out of fear of arrest, and that they later returned to Jerusalem.